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August 17, 2010

An Armful of Jewish Pride

BY JULIE GRUENBAUM FAX

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Kids who sport a tangle of Silly Bandz on their arms can now do so with some ethnic pride. At least three companies are marketing Jewish versions of the silicon rubber-band bracelets.

Silly Bandz, the trend du jour this summer, come in hundreds of shapes — iPods, dog bones, shoes, peace signs — which stretch to fit onto the wrist but spring back to their original shape when removed. Both boys and girls collect and trade the bands, and wear dozens at a time.

Since May, sales have jumped to well over \$100 million for the Silly Bandz brand, which sell for around \$5 for a pack of 24.

Dozens of knock-off brands have flooded the market, and among those are JewlyBandz (jewlybandz.com), MeshugaBands (meshugabands.blogspot.com) and BiblicalBandz (biblicalbandz.com/), which sell shapes of Jewish symbols — Stars of David, shofars, menorahs and the Torah — and quirkier items like a glow-in-the-dark state of Israel, a tie-dye tree of life and a glitter chamsa.

JewlyBandz makes holiday packs, with a (presumably nonleather) sneaker and Cohen hands for Yom Kippur, a bonfire for Lag b'Omer and a cloud with lightning for Shavuot.

Rabbi Moshe Rabin, a Chabad rabbi in Florida who runs a girls' seminary, began making JewlyBandz in the early summer. Rabbi Jason Miller, who runs nondenominational camping programs in Michigan, was searching for just such a product, and he contacted Rabin. The rabbis formed a sort of partnership — Miller markets to his audience of non-Orthodox youth and sells in bulk to other rabbis and camp directors. The profits from Miller's orders go to support nondenominational camp scholarships and programs, while Rabin's orders support his Chabad programs.

"Rabbi Rabin teaches Chabad girls in Florida, and I work with Reform and Conservative kids in Detroit, but we said there was no reason we can't use these bands for the same educational purposes," Miller said. "His shofar silly band and the shofar silly band I'm going to give out gives the same message."

Many schools and synagogues have also placed orders for customized designs and plan to hand them out for the High Holy Days or save them for Chanukah.

Rabbi Emily Losben-Ostrov, rabbi and educational director at the Sinai Reform Temple in Bay Shore, Long Island, N.Y., also caught the fad early, creating MeshugaBands after she saw a student with a Christmas-tree band.

"I envisioned my students walking around thinking, 'I've got a Jewish star on my wrist,'" she told the New York Jewish Week.

Biblical Bandz launched earlier this summer, offering 30 different designs, including a Chabad pack, tefillin and mezuzah, the aleph bet and Noah's ark. Doron Fetman of Nextrendz Imports Inc., and Launch Consulting's Dan Weinstein, both based in New York, collaborated on the idea and have been amazed at the craze surrounding the product line. Miller said he's sold thousands, and some organizations are reselling the bands as fundraisers.

"Those of us with our finger on the pulse of what Jewish youth and Jewish teens are interested in really have an obligation to turn it into a Jewish educational endeavor and to market it as widely as possible," Miller said.

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